

## The Third Sunday of Lent

*St Mary the Virgin, St Briavels, and St Mary Magdelene,  
Hewelsfield, 2023.*

*Exodus 17: 1-7  
John 4: 5-42*

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit.  
Amen.

Throughout the tradition, most services of daily morning prayer have begun with Psalm 95 [*which we have just heard read*]. Those of you who can dredge BCP Matins out from your memories might remember that immediately after the opening responses comes what is referred to as the *Venite*, which is only called that because that is the Latin translation of the opening words of Psalm 95, “O come!” For centuries, Christian communities, saying their daily prayers, have begun with these words. The Church of England dropped it except on Fridays during the middle of the last century, which I think is a shame, but there is nothing to stop you from picking it up as a personal tradition anyway of course.

About halfway through Psalm 95 come these verses:  
‘O that today you would listen to his voice!  
Harden not your hearts as at Meribah,  
as on that day at Massah in the desert  
when your forebears put me to the test;  
when they tried me, though they saw my work.’

It’s a daily challenge. The prayerbook that my Cistercian Order uses reads this Psalm first thing every day, and I remember the Abbot of Mount St Bernard’s saying that it is a really important daily challenge not just to a monk or a nun, but to every

Christian: O that today you would listen to his voice. Harden not your heart.

Each of us has a choice, every day, as to how we orient our heart, our ears, our spirits. We can open all of those things, or we can harden them. And if we harden them we are less likely to hear the Lord’s voice. If we are open to the Lord’s voice, our hearts are less likely to become hardened.

And that Psalm, and its use daily at the very beginning of the day in the *Venite*, is of course referencing the passage from Exodus that we heard this morning. The children of Israel, wandering in the wilderness on their journey from Egypt to the Promised Land, become thirsty, and they forget the wonderful deeds that God has done, and they complain, and they put Moses and the Lord to the test. And so those two place names, Meribah and Massah, get kind of codified into our collective tradition, and there they sit in the Psalm as reminders of how easy it is to lose heart, to lose faith, and to begin to put God to the test. But alongside that, we get given that daily challenge, that daily offering from the Lord: ‘O that today you would listen to his voice.’

Listening is the antidote to despair. To hardness of heart. Spiritual listening. Prayer. And it is not by accident that St Benedict begins his Rule, the document that has shaped Western Christianity probably more than anything other than the Bible, with the words, ‘Listen, my child, to the Master’s instructions.’

We are coming up to halfway through Lent now. Wednesday marks the halfway point. And as I think I probably said three or four weeks ago, Lent is our annual MOT. Our ‘points and plugs service’, if you like. And one of the great disciplines of Lent is of course that of prayer. We have a little look at our prayer life,

each Lent, to see if it has become thin. To see if it has become routine. To see if it has become something less than listening for, and listening to, the voice of the Lord.

And that of course is because when our prayer life is robust and exciting and active, we find ourselves plugging in to the great stream of living water that issues from the throne of grace. Today's gospel reading is one of the great set of really quite long readings from St Matthew's Gospel that are traditionally used in the preparation of candidates for baptism and confirmation at Easter.

Last week we had Nicodemus coming to Jesus by night to learn about being born-again. Next week you probably won't hear the story of the man born blind, because Mothering Sunday might body-block that reading, but that one is all about really *seeing* properly, spiritually. And then in a fortnight we hear the story of the raising of Lazarus from the dead. And these readings build up for us a pattern for the Christian life. We are born again. We can see God. We can rise with Jesus. And today, we can drink living water.

Living water is what is promised to the Samaritan woman. It's an extraordinary story isn't it? Jesus asks her for a drink, and she says, 'well, do you know what, I'm not supposed to give you a drink because you're a Jew and I'm a Samaritan.' Jesus counters by saying, 'actually if you really knew who I was you would ask *me* for a drink and I would give you living water.' And then, in one of my absolute favourite bits of the Bible, she says to him, 'where's your bucket?!' 'How can you give me a drink? You haven't got a bucket.'

Practicalities such as whether or not you have the right receptacle to use at the well, whether you are actually dipping

from the correct source, or whether you are on the right place on the mountain just start to fade away. Because of course the story goes on, and it is a story about breaking down barriers. Between men and women, between religious traditions. Between places of worship. It is another one of those biblical moments where we recognise that the offer that we receive is more generous and more all-encompassing than we could have ever imagined.

And living water pushes open the lock gates of our hearts. To stop them being hardened. To stop us turning inwards on ourselves. To stop us settling back into comfortable silos or being tempted to define ourselves as 'in' rather than 'out'.

O, that today you would listen to his voice;  
harden not your hearts.

At this point in Lent, almost halfway to Easter now, we might make a midcourse correction, if we need to. We might take that verse from Psalm 95 and carry it with us through these final four weeks. Why not incorporate it into your daily prayers, like monks and nuns and countless faithful Christians have done over the centuries. As you wake up, use it, and ask: How will I live this day? Will I live this day listening for the voice of God? Will I live this day in the hope and the ambition that my heart will be open, and not hard? And when it does get hardened, will I listen again for the Lord's voice? Will I listen for the rush of living water?

And do I have my bucket ready to dip, and draw, and drink from that extraordinary stream, and so live my life in the flow of God's love?

Amen.